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Hostile and generous toleration

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South Place Religious Society

FINSBURY, E.C.

HOSTILE & GENEROUS TOLERATION.

(A NEW THEORY OF TOLERATION.)

*"Give us no light, Great Heaven, but such as turns
To energy of human fellowship."* — GEORGE ELIOT.

BY

GEORGE JACOB HOLYOAKE.

A DISCOURSE DELIVERED IN SOUTH PLACE CHAPEL,

On SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 28th, 1886.

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[The reader who happens to have been a hearer of this Discourse will find that a short passage is now included explaining the way in which Intolerance becomes connected with the Conscience. It was omitted by the Speaker lest the Discourse should exceed the time allotted to it.]

The Prayer.

[The speaker said that when he attended Churches, which it was oft his delight to do, he observed that prayers were made which had been used before. He, therefore, would repeat one which he had made but once—a long time ago and far off—namely, in the Parker Memorial Hall, Boston, a hall associated with the name of a great preacher, Theodore Parker, as this Chapel is with the name of William Johnson Fox, and later with that of Moncure D. Conway.]

IF, in that illimitable and coherent mystery which we call the Universe, there bendeth a listening ear to creatures who presume to speak to it, we ask chiefly that there may be given unto us reticence and modesty. We pray not for the rich, who have more means of happiness than belong to them, nor for the powerful, who have more resources for doing good than they use. We exclaim, with the great Persian Saadi: "O God, have mercy on the wicked, for thou hast done everything for the good in making them good." We pray that sense be given to the poor, who are poor because they want sense. We pray not merely for the poor of this land where we speak, but for the poor of every country; for the barbarian of every clime, for the slave who is in bonds and the slave who is called "free," and is not so. Teach civilised and cultivated men to understand that God is at least a gentleman, whose lofty generosity is above incompetent praise, and shrinks from the weariness of interminable, pauperic thanks. Above all, teach the people that they dwell in a self-acting Universe, and that its conjectured author can derive no honor save in beholding a self-helping, independent, and gladsome world.

O Nature, who art more intelligent than any Church, more merciful than any creed, more joyous than any psalm, disclaim the awful impositions of superstition and terror, let the common people learn to trust, and

know that there can be no glory to any god save in the happiness of his creatures, human and otherwise. Give to the people ambition without vanity ; give them purposes which they know to be compatible with the good of others ; give them the love of politics apart from speculation ; enable them to see that freedom is not outrage. Above all, endow them with the grandest charm of equality, quietness, courtesy, and deference to each other.

Truth springs up like flowers in the fields and hedgerows of life,—always modest, always unobtrusive, always gladsome. Give us discernment to see it ; give us the sense to welcome it ; give us the curiosity to study it ; give us the understanding to know its worth ; give us the courage to act upon it ; give us the generosity to extend it to all who know it not. Then we shall need no more to vex the indulgent ear of God with the ignominious supplications of unmanly despair or wayward discontent ; and we shall rise to the dignity of the highest nations, which are known by the sign that they have the least need of prayer.

HOSTILE AND GENEROUS TOLERATION.

IT is fully forty-five years since I sat in yonder pew [pointing to the gallery] thinking I should like one day to speak once from this platform--my present subject being then in my mind. Perhaps there—or there—[indicating seats where some of the older congregation were then present] sit now not more than half-a-dozen persons who were part of the congregation in the year 1841. Even the great preacher whom I then heard, whose clear, steely, penetrating, persuasive voice, reached every ear and inspired every understanding—is no more. A few Sundays after I first heard Mr. Fox, he read in this place a letter which I had written to him, being then a prisoner in a distant gaol, because toleration of any kind was not then a virtue in those parts. Mr. Justice Erskine admitted that I had not obtruded my opinions on anyone (which I never do) but had merely answered a public question fairly and frankly. He admitted that I could not honestly have given any other answer, and, I being a young man, he sentenced me to six months' imprisonment to encourage me in candour. Mr. Fox pleaded, in his eloquent way, for permissive toleration. Tolerance went no farther in England in 1841. The first question is "What is Toleration?" It is permission, and permission is dictation, since he who can give permission can withhold it, and so far as he has influence can compel you in the course he desires you to

take. Then arises the further question, "Has anyone a right to dictate to another what he shall do or believe?" It is idle to ask this question—since everybody does it. Intolerance is instinctive: it is born with us. It is the gift of Nature, put into our minds at birth, to protect us in unknown paths: which lie before us in early years. But of this protective intolerance we have less and less need as experience brings us wider knowledge. In inexperienced days we are oft intolerant of good—not knowing it. There are those who hold Intolerance as always evil. This is not so. It is in many things defensive even in mature life. Intolerance of evil is necessary to men and governments. A State should be intolerant of oppression—of injustice—of class privilege—of inequality of rights—of slavery—of poverty—of unhealthy tenements; which breed death. When a State lacking wisdom permits preventible evils it is guilty of ignorant toleration. Everybody can see that acts harmful to order, property, and life must be prohibited. The trouble comes with regard to ideas. Yet ideas are the germs of acts—some evil and more good—which good or evil are the source of all intellectual life. Their number constitute the riches of the understanding. Ancient Aryanism and Paganism understood this: It was Christianity which first introduced a terror of intellectual toleration into the human mind. How slowly that alarmed distrust of ideas is decreasing, the history of modern toleration shows. From Milton to James Mill the theory of toleration received no enlargement. From James Mill until now, it has stood at the point of coldly permitting what we dislike. Milton wrote for Puritan Toleration—Mill for Intellectual Toleration. Milton said "I mean not to tolerate Popery and open superstition, which itself should be extirpated." "That which is impious, or evil absolutely, either against faith or manners, no law can possibly permit." Baxter, who wrote after Milton, called religious toleration "Soul-murder" which in the perverted eyes of orthodoxy it is. When reminded that he himself had needed toleration, (he having been imprisoned for his faith) he answered "Ah but the cases were very different, I was in the right; whereas the vast majority of those who will benefit by this new fangled toleration are shockingly in the wrong."

Yet it was Baxter who dug out and adopted from an obscure German treatise, the noble maxim which went beyond Milton in civility to honest error. The maxim was this, "In necessary things unity, in doubtful things liberty, in all things charity." Both Milton and Baxter, the two greatest names in the Puritan calendar—were only for Toleration Limited. The Church was for Uniformity—with no tolerance for Dissent—Dissenters were for Religious Toleration measured by the Puritan Conscience. Puritan Toleration knew no extension until the days of James Mill and Lord Brougham. They taught the new Theory of Intellectual Toleration. The Puritan doctrine was that all heretical diversity of opinion proceeds from depravity of heart. James Mill demonstrated that belief depended, not upon the state of the heart, but upon the nature of the evidence before the understanding—therefore actual belief, whatever it was should be void of offence in the eye of man, and void of crime in the eye of God. This theory means that though sincere opinion is not always true, nor always useful; it is always to be permitted and acted upon, so long as no injury results to others therefrom. The standard of the new Toleration was as Grote said in his far-perceiving way—"Reasoned Truth." Its condition of Tolerance was that it should submit to criticism and seek to establish itself by Discussion alone. This was an enormous gain. Toleration by Evidence superseded Toleration by Conscience and doubled the population of Ideas in the world. In my early controversial days Toleration by Evidence was not in the mind of any Church—unless among Unitarians. It is in the mind of society now. Still it is a sort of Poor-law toleration, which regards poor ideas like poor persons coming upon the Rates, who cannot be killed—but for whom the very least is to be done which will keep them alive. It does not strangle Truth at its birth—it gives it a chance of life—but accords it no friendly settlement, lest it become chargeable upon some philosophical parish already overburdened with pauper opinions. This is Inclement Toleration—it is a frozen sort of permission that new or unfriended Truth may look after itself and take care of itself—if it can. Philosophical Toleration carries a Refrigerator in its heart: it has a

congealing compassion for new ideas, under which they commonly perish. Only the hardier sort live and bud in more genial days. We have other forms of reluctant consent, that opinions not our own may live: the most respectable being Politic Toleration, as that adopted by the Romans, who regarded all religions as equally true to the people, equally useful to the magistrate, and equally false in the eyes of the Philosopher. This is the Toleration of statesmen and gentlemen, who despise interference with the caprice or conscience of others, as the act of vulgar fanatics. Among modern Sectaries there has grown up what may be denominated a Prudent Toleration as when some sects admit the right of other sects to exist—lest they should be put down themselves. Roman Catholic magistrates in Protestant countries are tolerant for this reason. Protestant Viceroy in India, however mad they may be and often have been, to convert the natives, are compelled to permit even superstition to practise its ceremonies, which are not murderous—lest mutinies and religious wars arise, and render our rule impossible there. There are opinions which arise in ignorance and presumption. Sometimes defensible ideas are expressed so unskillfully or so offensively that statesmen accord to them a Contemptuous Toleration on the ground that they are Pole-cat opinions, which if interfered with may become noisome and fill the atmosphere with undesirable odours. Thus the State treats eccentric creeds and publications to which prohibition might draw morbid attention—with Silent Toleration. Under the best theory of toleration extant, new thought (except in this Chapel) is treated with utter shabbiness, and even treachery. Even in the prize ring you must fight fair. Yet religious controversy is mostly, far below the Prize Ring in respect of fairness. If a man fought with an adversary whose sword was shorter than his own—the seconds who permitted such a duel would be execrated. If a man fought with pistols knowing that his adversary's could not go off, and had so contrived it—it would be regarded as murder if his adversary was killed. This conduct which would be held infamous by men of honour is regarded as "conscientious" in clerical and political controversy. If a chemical controversy was proposed to Huxley or

Tyndall, with an antagonist who had a broken retort, or who had no proper apparatus for proving the thing in dispute; these philosophers, being gentlemen, would disdain to contend with him, while he was so circumstanced, or they would lend him what he needed for his demonstration, that he might do his best. Yet it is most rare that any Christian advocate will engage in controversy with any adversary unless he is destitute of means of defence. Preachers—opulently provided at home for defending their tenets—have often refused to meet me—a wandering disputant—unless the proceeds of the debate were given to some charity—not that they cared for the charity having more—what they cared for was that I should have nothing. Indeed, most preachers prefer that their adversary should not be heard at all, and where they have authority over platforms or libraries, they prohibit discussion and exclude all works which give the side opposite to their own. This is hamstringing opinion clandestinely, as the Irish do cattle by night, and the operators issue from 10,000 Churches.

That is a Cowardly Toleration, yet most prevalent, which professes to respect the right of rival opinion, and at the same time attaches to it some odious badge which shall expose it to hatred and ridicule—which challenges it to make good its claim to exist but refuses it public halls for its advocates to speak in, and hinders the circulation of papers which represent it. It takes the credit of fighting opinion openly, and assassinates it secretly: or stands by while others kill it.

Why is it that Toleration is so commonly not only Hostile but shabby? It is because even Liberal minded Christians and even Liberal Thinkers say “I cannot help those who maintain erroneous and dangerous opinions to propagate them. It is against my conscience. All I can give is due to the support of what I take to be truth.” This is the thought that kills the sentiment of generous toleration. I admit no man is called upon to aid any opinion not conscientiously maintained from a passion for facts; and for the good of others. He is not called upon to aid the thief or murderer. There is no thief who is willing to be robbed—there is no murderer who is willing to be killed. You know by

that sign that the thief is a knave and the murderer a scoundrel, and the profligate and the obscene belong by their acts to the same class. For them no plea is made by me: they do not concern us here. It is only honest beliefs in emergency which are entitled to helpful countenance. If it be "against a man's conscience" to give aid to honest opinion he thinks dangerous, he is equally bound not to suffer it to be done. Toleration itself is aid as far as it goes since it gives sanction and opportunity to error. He who finds it against his conscience to aid opinion, not his own, is right to put it down. It was under this conscientious belief that the Inquisition was justifiable against Protestants. The Five Mile Acts were fair against Nonconformists. The Test Acts were justifiable precaution against them. The mob that burnt Priestley's house were wiser than they knew. The clergy who prevented the Royal Society from sending Priestley to the South Seas with Capt. Cook lest Unitarianism should corrupt the fishes, were within the rights of conscience. This Chapel ought to be closed on that principle. No Synagogue should be allowed to remain open. Boycotting in Ireland is entirely laudable. The Tory should stamp out the Whig and the Radical should stamp out the Liberal, and the Social Democrat stamp out both of them. The State should determine not only opinion but dietary, as Sir Wilfred Lawson and the vegetarians wish the State would. Tyranny is the only lawful form of government and murder the legitimate agent of Uniformity, and as such Richelieu employed it. All short of this is but the cowardice of conscience, temporizing with what it knows to be dangerous.

We see in the Liberal disunion and feebleness of a hundred boroughs what one is almost tempted to call the farce of conscience. The working class Liberals want to have their own way but cannot pay their way and have conscientious objections to going any part of the same way with those who can pay for them; and those who can pay their way cannot conscientiously help those who want to go farther than themselves. Thus, but for the pure eccentricity of conscience the Liberals of limited aims could get all they want, and the more insatiable Liberals would get half of what they want. Instead of this they let those attain to power who will give them

nothing. In the early part of this century there was no Unitarian Church in the town of Bury. The then Earl of Derby held all the available land and refused to sell a site, and the Unitarians had to wait until they could convert a Bury man who had land and then wait till he died, when he left them the bit on which their Church now stands. The Earl who fought cocks and supported the Church, was quite right on the "conscientious" theory. He could not consistently assist in propagating opinions he thought dangerous. Neither here nor elsewhere, nor at any time, have I thought it right to maintain any theory which I had not tested, nor counsel any course which I did not practise. Though I early departed from the faith of my Mother, yet as her sight grew dim I bought her Bibles of larger and larger type as years passed on, and when I visited her read the Bible to her. It never occurred to me that because I had another source of trust that she should not have that which was consolation to her. When I lived at Harrow lately, a poor lady neighbour of great age, told how "that the missionary who visited her counselled her to read her Bible constantly, but I can no longer see" she remarked. As the missionary neither brought her Scriptures in large type, nor gave her glasses I bought her spectacles that she might nourish her last hopes by what she esteemed, the sacred page. When I lived at Temple Bar, Mr. Twining, the Banker, sent me a circular which other residents received, saying that the Vicar of St. Bride's was absent through illness from overwork, and that funds were wanted for an assistant curate. I sent half-a-guinea saying that though I was not likely to need the curate's services I was glad that my poorer neighbours, of a different way of thinking, should have that consolation in their last hours, which his ministrations might afford them. I did this because I am perhaps the only person extant who is not fully assured of his own infallibility. Honest convictions are as food. Opinions on which another can live would be injurious to me. That alimont of belief may gladden the soul of my neighbour and save the *Inquirer*, the *Spectator* and Mr. Mallock from melancholy—which might, indeed would, generate in me decay and despair, yet would I in no way diminish that which "makes life worth living" to them,

had I the power to do it. What I contend for is that the Toleration among Liberals should at least be as broad, as impartial, and as helpful as that of the State. The State concedes to all equal publicity of opinion, and assists it by facilities. "Civil and religious equality" accords equal rights and chances to Error and Truth. The majority of men being in the wrong, upon nearly every question—if the State gave a preference for any form of opinion, it would give the preference to the wrong one—as it usually has done. Why should we not personally treat the opinion of our neighbours with as much liberality as the State?

The Post Office carries the letters of liars and knaves as well as those of true and honest men. The railways carry the thief with his plunder, and the murderer from justice—as well as the police who follow in pursuit of them—and rarely overtake them. The physician restores the health of the rascal, although he knows that he is invigorating him for new outrages. The Statesman grants equal political rights to the traitor and the patriot as we have lately done in Ireland. Parliament admits to their seats Members base and honourable—mostly the base—without enquiry, or hesitation—unless they happen to be honest heretics. The Post Office cannot pause to peruse the letters in its boxes before despatching them. Railway Companies cannot examine into the characters of passengers before issuing tickets to them—the physician cannot enquire into the personal morality of his patient before prescribing for him—the Statesman cannot analyse political qualities of the electors before enfranchising them. The House of Commons cannot enter into the private lives of its Members before permitting them to address the Speaker. All the business of the World would stand still—intercourse would be arrested—legislation would cease—honest men would be ruined, and the sick would die—before an infallible inquisition into claims and character of every person

could be made. It is the same with intellectual truth. Unless we accord what we deem error an equal chance with what we deem truth, truth will have but a precarious chance, and instead of proceeding with buoyant steps will continue to limp through the world. A wise Toleration, like the impartial Sun, irradiates equally the just and the unjust. After all the brilliant truths which controversy and controversy alone has established, it is strange how few are the persons who see in the competent Adversary not the enemy but the Friend in the search for Truth. As yet there is no recognized toleration which does not treat all opinion—not our own—as an evil to be endured lest the attempt to repress it should aggravate it. Whereas all new ideas should be challenged to enter fairly equipped, the arena of discussion, where only error is killed and truth is vindicated.

I am against that Reluctant toleration which suffers your opinion because it cannot safely destroy it—but if it could would also destroy those who hold it. I am for a Brave toleration which does not fear the sound of many voices nor the glare of many lights. I despise that Timid toleration which has neither the spirit of truth, nor the trust of truth—which fearing to stab, starves rival opinion, lest it should prove too strong in contest. Let us hate that Penurious toleration which gives nothing—which takes credit for acknowledging your right to your opinions, but will render them no succour in their time of need, and will cheerfully see them die of starvation as Jane Shore was left to die by the King. I am for a Generous toleration which not only asserts fair play but takes care that rival opinion is not killed by foul play. I am for toleration which is clean-handed and open-handed, which does not connive at the assassination of opinion, nor is accessory to it, either before or after the fact. For all the purposes of intellectual fraternity I see people simply as clothed in their qualities. Their outward dress,

their features, their stature, are to me as though they were not. But their ideal loftier than their life—their ambition of service—their fair intent—their passion for justice—their strivings for untied truth—are to me as palpable things.

The charity of equity does not consist in starving the cause of truth of which you are assured, in order to support that to which you are opposed, but in according to unfriended truth moderate hospitality. New ideas, like products of earth or ocean, are often as messengers from the realms of unknown Nature. Some of these strangers bear no letter of introduction, and their message is disregarded though of miraculous interest, as has often appeared afterwards.

But my argument will be incomplete and inconclusive if it appears to ignore or undervalue conscience in judgment and conduct. I am for conscience, provided it is an instructed conscience. I admit it remains to me to show how intolerance arises in upright minds.

The origin of Conscience is in the desire for rectitude and truth. Conscience is the sense of duty founded upon truth—real or supposed. But if the knowledge be narrow the conscience will be narrow, and its action mischievous so far as it lacks understanding. There is a foolish conscience as well as a wise conscience. The operation of the foolish conscience is seen in Intolerance.

Conscience inspired by its instinct of rectitude and confident of its good intent, supposes itself infallible. Not knowing that it is not all-knowing—not knowing that sincerity though sinless is not errorless—it mistakes its own honesty for infallibility, and regards all ideas, not its own, as hostile to truth, and thinks it a duty to withstand them and suppress them. A new idea affronts their sense of un mistakeableness. Their minds are made up, and they have no room in it for new conceptions. A new idea conflicts with their narrower knowledge. They cannot harmonise it with the

ideas they have. To give up what they have been taught is true, is beyond their power. They do not know that a wise man is always unlearning errors which have imposed themselves upon him. They cannot conceive that an obscure author of a new thought is wiser than all the world—as every discoverer and every inventor is—as the world well knows by the mighty resources of national and intellectual wealth which despised, unfriended and neglected thinkers have brought it. It is conscience believing in its own infallibility and resenting all thought which would make it wiser, that has created and sustained hostile intolerance. Now science has taught men how ideas arise, intolerance, however conscientious, is seen to be a sin against improvement, and general friendliness to new thought is a condition of progress. It is science which shows that the time is come when toleration may cease to be hostile and may advantageously be friendly and even generous.

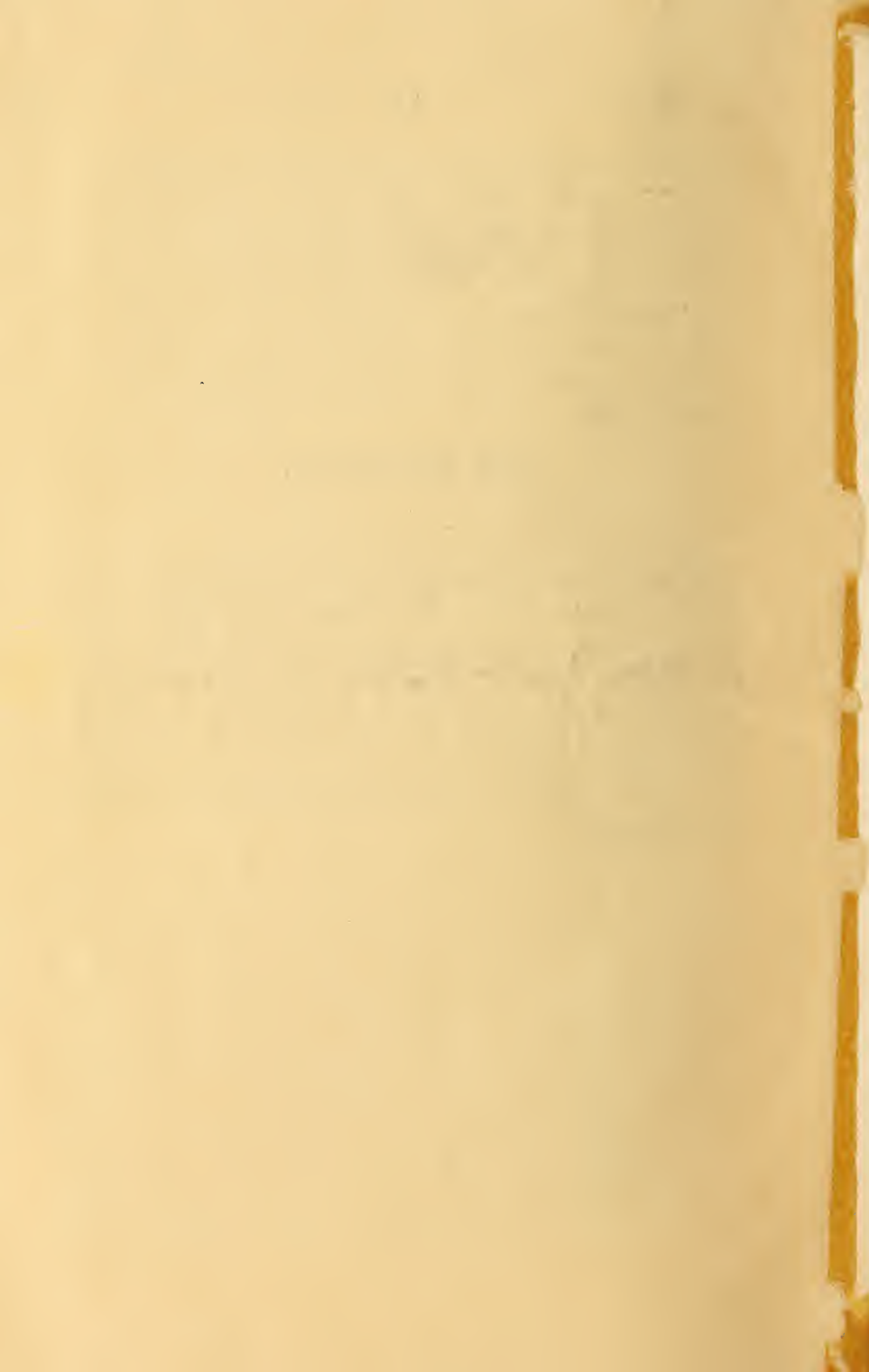
Not that a man is called upon to prostrate himself before every fool thought, that may be obtruded on his notice for the first time. If indeed he is sure that the thought is foolish he had better let the fool demonstrate himself its folly, which not being done often leads ignorant persons to think it true, and on that account to champion it. Civility to new ideas has this merit, that it ensures genial welcome to new truth, always lonely. How many discoverers and inventors by whose unregarded labours we profit daily, were uncheered and unfriended, who lived in penury, often in scorn, and perished in despair. We know their value now, and pour our tardy thanks into the dull cold ear of death and put up memorials to them. As Mr. Fox once said in this place, "We refused them bread while living and give them a stone when dead." This will go on unless a generous toleration of new truth comes to prevail.

Besides, what a gain this sentiment is in diffusing truth. The art

of respecting the ideas of others is the surest way of obtaining attention to our own. Men never turn away from the truth when they see it presented in good faith and good feeling. It is the brutal, coarse, and contemptuous presentment of it which repels them from it. For myself I never forget how in my youth, and in controversy, an incurable distrust of Christianity crept into my heart by arrogant, disdainful and disparaging toleration. On last Tuesday I had the pleasure to pay a visit to Mr. Bright at his home in Rochdale. The conversation turning upon America, I mentioned how, when Mr. Wendell Phillips, counted the greatest orator of America as we count Mr. Bright the greatest orator here, was showing me State Street in Boston, we met Mr. Bright's son with some friends, when Phillips took off his hat and stood with his fine Roman head uncovered all the while he spoke with him. Mr. Bright said to me, "I ought to have rebuked him." I answered "No. I saw no nobler sight in America. It proved that the Republic had reverence in its heart for something higher than dollars. It was part of the respect they owed you who had served the nation." Mr. Bright replied in words which serve well to illustrate my argument. He said "he could not understand why so much kindness was shown to him and to all who bore his name, when all the service he had ever been able to render to America was to make a few speeches pleading for justice towards her. And he added, I believe that had Lord Palmerston listened to my appeal to him, to treat America with a friendly and not a hostile neutrality, the hearts of the two nations had been knit together as though they had never been parted." It is ever thus: generous toleration of the rights of others is the negotiator of truth between individuals and of goodwill between nations. It was knowing this which caused George Eliot to say "the greatest of virtues is tolerance," and Schiller to write that "large tolerance is only possible to men of the largest information."

The Benediction.

One to whom the Christian world accords the high name of the Chief of Apostles said :—"Now abideth three things—Faith, Hope and Charity—but the greatest of these is Charity." More than any other Apostle, Paul forgot in practice what he thus declared—but it was a great moment when he perceived that Charity was the supreme virtue of man. And it will be better for Truth and Peace and Unity, if we shall remain permanently under that noble inspiration.



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